Homily concerning the Holy Mother of God, ever-virgin

Gregory Thaumaturgus (c. AD 213–270)

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ON AN ANTE-NICENE HOMILY OF GREGORY THAUMATURGUS. — NOTE OF TRANSLATOR (F. C. CONYBEARE).

[The following Armenian homily of Gregory Thaumaturgus was printed for the first time in the journal called Ararat, of the convent of Etschmiadzin, for September, 1895. It is unknown in Greek. The text so printed, and here translated, is contained in an old book of homilies in the Etschmiadzin library. It is also found in a MS. of San Lazaro, Djarrentir, No. 3; but apparently without title. It is quite in the style of the other homilies ascribed to this father. These are by some (e.g., Harnack, Altchristliche Literatur bis Eusebius, p. 431) accounted spurious. Why I cannot understand; for they are found, whether in Greek, or in Syriac, or in Armenian, with the constant ascription to this Gregory. Why should a later age have forged an entire series of homilies and ascribed them to him? If they were Tentenzschriften, i.e., homilies written with a certain and marked doctrinal bias of some kind, their forgery would be intelligible. But they cannot be accused of being this. They are just the pious and rather rhetorical outpourings of a devout and simple mind.

This homily may therefore be accepted as an example of the Pulpit eloquence of this Gregory. About the middle of the third century it must have stirred some congregation in Neo-Caesarea. It is very florid, and in its refrains more like a hymn than a sermon. To a modern reader it must needs appear a rather tawdry effort. But the image of Christ as Spring in §26 in a measure redeems the whole piece, and some other thoughts as well are prettily worked out. The Armenian is often obscure, and contains several compounds not otherwise known. I have rendered it quite literally. It was made from Greek. For convenience I have broken it up into sections, adding in square brackets the few words required here and there to make grammar or sense.----F. C. C] The Homily of St. Gregory the Wonder-worker, concerning the Holy Mother of God, ever-virgin. 1. When I remember the disobedience of Eve, I weep. But when I view the fruit of Mary, I am again renewed. Deathless by descent, invisible through beauty, before the ages light of light; of God the Father wast Thou begotten; being Word and Son of God, Thou

didst take on flesh from Mary Virgin, in order that Thou mightest renew afresh Adam fashioned by Thy holy hand.

2. Holy, deathless, eternal, inaccessible, without change, without turn, True Son of God art Thou before the ages; yet wast pleased to be conceived and formed in the womb of the Holy Virgin, in order that Thou mightest make alive once more man first fashioned by Thy holy hand, but dead through sin. 3. By the good pleasure Thou didst issue forth, by the good pleasure and will of the invisible Father. Wherefore we all invoke Thee, calling Thee King. Be Thou our succour; Thou that wast born of the Virgin and wrapt in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger, and wast suckled by Mary; to the end that Thou mightest make alive once more the first-created Adam that was dead through sin. 4. Feasted with knowledge from the Divine knowledge, let us emit like a fountain the sweetly sounding hymns of praise; let us glorify the sweet powers of the Divine Word. With sweetly sounding doctrine let us send forth praise worthy of the Divine grace; forasmuch as earth, and sea, and all created things, visible and invisible, bless and glorify God's love for man; for that His majesty was among [us]. For being God He appeared in the flesh, and taking on Himself extreme humility, was born of the Holy Virgin, to the end that He might renew afresh him that was dead through disobedience.

5. Turn ye, O congregations, and come. Let us all praise Him that is born of the Virgin. For that being the glory and image before the ages of the Godhead, He yet became a fellow-sufferer with us of poverty. Being the exceeding magnifical power [and] image of God, He took on the form of a slave. He that putteth on the light as a garment, consorted with men as one that is vile. He that is hymned by cherubim and by myriad angels, as a citizen on earth doth He live. He that being before (all) maketh all creation alive, was born of the Holy Virgin, in order that He might make alive once more the first created. 6. Christ our God took on [Himself] to begin life as man (lit. the beginning of humanity), being yet a sharer of the [life] without beginning of God the Father; in order to lift up unto the beginningless beginning of the Godhead man that was fallen.

7. And He took the form of a slave from the Holy Virgin, in order to call us up to the glorified dominical image. He put on the outward shape made of clay, that He might make [us] sharers of the heavenly form. He sat in the lap of the Holy Virgin, that He might place us on the right hand in the intimacy of His Father. In a vile body was He; and by means of the same He was laid in a tomb, that He might manifest us heirs of eternal life. In the womb of the Holy Virgin was He, the incomprehensible (or inaccessible) one, confined; in order that He might renew the Adam destroyed through sin. 8. Power of the Father and living font, Christ our God, [He] is the life-fraught mystery, in whom even through [His] living voice we believed; life without end He freely bestows on those who hope in Him, and with

the Spirit of grace He illumines the races of men. From this fountain, living and ever-flowing and of sweet taste, whosoever in faith are athirst are filled and sated.

9. Wherefore even with one voice [let us sing the praises] of God the Word, that according to the worthiness of each is cause and promoter of salvation, unto young men and old, and unto children and women. For from Mary, the divine fountain of the ineffable Godhead, gushes forth grace and free gift of the Holy Spirit. From a single Holy Virgin the Pearl of much price proceeded, in order to make alive once more the first-created man that was dead through sin. 10. He is the Sun of Righteousness, dawning upon earth; and in the fashion of a man He deigned to come unto our race. Having hidden in the coarse matter of humanity the effulgent splendour of His Godhead, and having filled [us] with the Divine Spirit, He hath also made us worthy to sing unto Him the angelic hymn of praise. 11. Let us twine, as with a wreath, the souls (or selves) [of them that love the festival and love to hearken] with golden blossoms, fain to be crowned with wreaths from the unfading gardens; and offering in our hands the fair-fruited flowers of Christ, let us gather [them]. For the God-like temple of the Holy Virgin is meet to be glorified with such a crown; because the illumining Pearl cometh forth, to the end that it may raise up again into the ever-streaming light them that were gone down into darkness and the shadow of death.

12. Regaled with the medicine (lit. poison) of the Divine words of Christ unto the grace of the same, let us send up unto Him some worthy hymn. Let us hasten to gather up the fruits of the mystery of immortality. Let us hasten to inhale the perfume of the God-clad symmetry (or harmony). In [our] language let us luxuriate in the Divine grace, and let us hasten to drive away from us the foul odour of sin. Let us rather clothe us in the sweet savour of the works of righteousness. Having put on ourselves the breastplate of faith, and the garb of a virtuous life, and the holy and spotless raiment of purity, let us fast (or? keep guard). For He is excellence, and hath His dwelling with peace, and is yoke-fellow of love and consorteth [therewith]; a blossom smelling of hope. And the lambs which in faith browse upon this shoot forth the light-like rod of the Trinity. But we, O my friends, resorting to the garden of the Saviour, let us praise the Holy Virgin; saying along with the angels in the language of Divine grace, ”Rejoice thou and be glad.” For from her first shone forth the eternally radiant light, that lighteth us with its goodness.

13. The Holy Virgin is herself both an honourable temple of God and a shrine made pure, and a golden altar of whole burnt offerings. By reason of her surpassing purity [she is] the Divine incense of oblation (= προθέσεως), and oil of the holy grace, and a precious vase bearing in itself the true nard; [yea and] the priestly diadem revealing the good pleasure of God, whom she alone approacheth holy in body and soul. [She is] the door which looks eastward, and by the comings in and goings forth the whole earth is illuminated. The fertile olive from which the Holy

Spirit took the fleshly slip (or twig) of the Lord, and saved the suffering race of men. She is the boast of virgins, and the joy of mothers; the declaration of archangels, even as it was spoken: ”Be thou glad and rejoice, the Lord with thee”; and again, ”from thee”; in order that He may make new once more the dead through sin.

14. Thou didst allow her to remain a virgin, and wast pleased, O Lord, to lie in the Virgin’s womb, sending in advance the archangel to announce it [to her]. But he from above, from the ineffable hosts, came unto Mary, and first heralded to her the tidings: ”Be thou glad and rejoice.” And he also added, ”The Lord with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” But she was in tumult, and pondered in her mind what sort of tidings was this. But then in seemly fashion, I ween, the grace chose out the Holy Virgin; for she was wise in all ways, nor was there her like among women of all nations. 15. Not as the first virgin did she, being alone in the garden, with loose and effeminate thought accept the advice of the serpent and destroy the thought of her heart; through whom came all the toil and sorrow of the saint. But such was the Holy Virgin that by her the former’s transgressions also were rectified. Nor, like Sarah, when she had good tidings that she would bear a son, did she rashly laugh; nor like Rebekah, who, with the temper of a deserter, accepted the ornaments, and willingly gave water to drink unto the camels of her betrothed. And unlike all other women, she did not accept the grace of greeting indiscreetly (or without testing it), but only through thought bright and clear (or through glittering thought).

16. Whence then dost thou bring with thee to us such a blessing? and [out] of what treasure-houses has been sent to us the Pearl of the Word? I would fain know what is the gift, and who is bearer of the Word, or indeed who is the sender thereof. From heaven thou earnest, the form of man thou displayest, and dost radiate forth a blaze (or torch) of light. 17. These things in herself the Holy Virgin asked in doubt. But the angel with such words as these solved her doubts: ”The Holy Spirit shall come unto thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. Wherefore thou shalt conceive and shalt bear a Son, and shalt call His name Jesus, unto the end that He save the race of men from the death of sin.” 18. The Virgin spake in turn unto the angel: My mind swims in thy words as in a sea. How shall this be unto me? for I desire not to know an earthly man, because I have devoted myself to the heavenly Bridegroom. I desire to remain a virgin. I wish not to betray the honour of my virginity.

19. Again in such words as these the angel confirmed the holy Virgin: Fear not, Mary. For ’tis not to frighten thee I came, but to dispel all thought of fear. Fear not, Mary; for thou hast found grace at God’s hands. Scan not too narrowly the grace, since it deigns not to give way to the laws of nature. The Holy Spirit shall come unto thee; wherefore that which is born of thee is holy and Son of God, sharer of the form and sharer of the substance, and sharer of the eternity of the Father; in whom

the Father, having acquired all manifestations, hath the adumbration (? of Himself) face to face, and by means of the light the glory gleameth forth. 20. Great is the mystery. Thou hast learned, O Mary, that which till now was hidden from angels. Thou hast known that which deaf prophets and patriarchs heard not; and thou hast heard that which the choirs of the God-clad were not ever held worthy to hear. David and Isaiah, and all the prophets foretold in their preaching about the Lord's becoming man. But do thou alone, O Holy Virgin, receive the mystery unknown by them, and learn and be not perplexed as to how this shall be unto thee. For He that fashioned man out of virgin soil, the Selfsame shall even now do as. He will for the salvation of His creature.

21. New radiance now of eternal light gleams forth for us in the inspired fitness (or harmony) of these words. Now is it meet and fitting for me to wonder after the manner of the Holy Virgin, to whom in seemly wise before all things the angel gave salutation thus: "Be thou glad and rejoice"; because with her are quickened and live, all the treasures of grace. Among all nations she alone was both virgin and mother and without knowledge of man, holy in body and soul. Among all nations she alone was made worthy to bring forth God; alone she carried in her Him who carries along all by His word. 22. And not only is it meet to marvel at the beauty of the Holy Mother of God, but also at the excellence of her spirit. Wherefore were addressed to her the words: "The Lord with thee"; and again also, "The Lord from thee." As if this: " He will save him that is in His image as being pitiful." As purse of the Divine mystery the Holy Virgin made herself ready, in which the Pearl of Life was enveloped in flesh and sealed; and she also became the receptacle of supramundane and Divine salvation.

23. Therefore let us also come, O my friends, and discharge our debt according to our ability; and following the voice of the archangel, let us cry aloud: "Be thou glad and rejoice; the Lord with thee." Nor any heavenly bridegroom He, but the very Lord Himself, the Father of purity and the guardian of virginity, and the Lord of holiness, the creator of inviolability, and the giver of freedom, overseer of salvation, and ordainer of true wisdom and bestower thereof----the Lord Himself with thee; for as much as even in thee the Divine grace reposed [and] upon thee, in order to make alive the race of men like a compassionate Lord.

24. Not any more doth Adam fear the crafty serpent; because our Lord is come and hath dispersed the host of the enemy. Not any more doth the race of men fear the craftiness and mad deceit of the serpent, because the Lord hath bruised the head of the dragon in the water of baptism. Not any more do I fear to hear the words: Dust thou wast, and unto dust shalt thou be turned. For the Lord in baptism hath washed away the stain of sin. Not any more do I weep, nor ever lament, nor ever reckon it again to wretchedness, when the thorns wound me. For our Lord hath plucked out by the roots the sins which are our thorns, and hath crowned His

head withal. Loosed is the first curse in which He said: Thorns and thistles shall earth bring forth to thee, for the thorn is plucked out by the roots, and the thistle withered up; and from the Holy Virgin hath shot up the tree of life and grace. No more doth Eva fear the reproach of the pangs of childbirth; for by the Holy Virgin her transgressions are blotted out and effaced; forasmuch as in her was God born, to the end that He might make alive him whom He made in His image.

25. A bulwark of imperishable life hath the Holy Virgin become unto us, and a fountain of light to those who have faith in Christ; a sunrise of the reasonable light is she found to be. Be thou glad and rejoice. The Lord with thee and from thee, who in His Godhead and His manhood is perfect, in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead: ”Be glad and rejoice, the Lord with thee and from thee” ----with His handmaid the Lord of glory; with her that is unspotted, He that halloweth all; with the beautiful, He who is wonderful in beauty above all the sons of men, to the end that He may make alive him whom He made in His image. 26. In the Divine words of the Teacher we believe and rejoice; for with roses and lilies and fragrant wreaths Christ, our imperishable Spring, hath come unto us, and hath filled the fair garden of the churches, even the seed-plots of our hearts, from the paradise of God. So then with holy heart let us draw nigh, and find the golden faith gleaming wide and the fruits of immortality smelling sweet therein. For in the desert of Mary the fair-fruited tree hath shot up, that like one holy and pitiful, He may make alive His creature.

27. Holy and wise in all things was the all-blessed Virgin; in all ways peerless among all nations, and unrivalled among women. Not as the first virgin Eva, who being alone in the garden, was in her weak mind led astray by the serpent; and so took his advice and brought death into the world; and because of that hath been all the suffering of saints. But in her alone, in this Holy Virgin Mary, the Stem of Life hath shot up for us. For she alone was spotless in soul and body. 28. With intrepid mind she spake to the angel: Whence is this salutation, and how shall this be unto me? Dost thou desire to learn how the exceeding magnifical power becomes a fellow-sufferer with us of our poverty? How He that hath power over the hosts assumes the image of our baseness; and how He who is God before the ages is about to become a child and be made flesh, He that putteth on light as a garment and giveth life unto His creature. Grant me, said the Holy Virgin, to learn such an impenetrable mystery, and I become the vessel that receives the Divine mystery (or thought), being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, and [I am] to receive the truth of His flesh in my flesh, unto the building by Wisdom of her abode.

29. The Word becometh flesh and dwelleth in us, that is, in the same flesh, which it took from us; and by the spirit of its native self (or soul) it spiritualises [itself]. And the unchangeable God accepts the form of a slave, to the end that He be regarded by the faithful as man; but that He may be manifested as God to the unfaithful,

in order to renew the first-created. 30. The element of flesh doth the Son of God take from the Holy Virgin, for before the ages He is God. He hath deigned to be born, and to be called Son of man, and to become visible, He the invisible; and for our sake to be poor, who is all riches; and to suffer as man, He the impassible and deathless. For with (or in) the flesh in truth He was united, but He was not changed in spirit. In a mortal body the Invisible One was enveloped, that He might make it also deathless, making it sharer of His deathlessness through His Godhead; to the end that He might renew him that was fashioned by His holy hands.

31. Glory and light are come into the world, Christ our God. He glorifies and illumines with His ever-streaming light, to whom the voice of the unseen Father bore witness: ”Yonder is My Son and Word, who is before the ages.” 32. But Mary was fortified by the word of the angel; but pondered in herself the birth of the Lord, confronted with the disparity of human thought. Now she lifted herself up to the lofty plane of the Divine, now again her mind was occupied with the lowliness of humanity. And thus as in the scale of reflection she balances the one and the other; even in that moment she becometh truly worthy of the design (or mind, or? entrance) of God. For she (or He) that preserved the treasure of her virginity pure and untarnished, she (or He) also made the boundaries of her heart inviolate. And the creature is saved which He made in His image.

33. Christ, Son of God, who was born of the Holy Virgin Mary, hath come as grace into the world; because by means of grace He hath made us alive, He that fashioned all things. Now that Christ is born into the world, doth all creation dance. He giveth in exchange His temptation, the coin of long-suffering, that He may claim (for us) the mansions of the kingdom. The Holy Virgin was filled with joy because He took from her His flesh, to the end that He might raise again him that was fallen under sin. 34. Evil thoughts are turned from us, when we sing psalms to Thee, O heavenly and holy Father; beholding the great light which Thou hast given to us, Jesus Christ, who was born of the Holy Virgin and wrought by means of His Godhead wonders; but for our sake accepted sufferings by means of His flesh. We then also still being in the flesh will hasten in body and soul to make the Deity propitious to us with angelic hymns, touching with our hands in figurative wise the divine [element] of the dogma (?), and will sow in our minds (or in our mysteries) the truth of faith. For the mystery (or thought) is inaccessible, invisible, unchangeable, not to be circumscribed, worshipped in its fulness and marvelled at in [our] mind. For even the Holy Virgin herself had marvelled at the manner of the mystery (or thought). How could the splendour of light become the offspring of a woman? She embraced in herself the treasure of life, and pondered in her mind the salutation of the archangel; until in the completion (of time) she bore the fruit of salvation, that it might save (or make alive) man.

35. Therefore, O ye fair-fruited and comely branches of Christ's teaching, ye shall in this place bring to us the fruits of blessing (= εὐλογίας). Here, where is all purity and fragrance, let us offer to God with holy conscience the incense of prayer. Here, where virginity and temperance dance together, bearing for fruit the life-giving cluster of grapes. Here, where they . . . unto us the . . . of victorious power and the treasure of love. Here, where the mystery of the Holy Trinity was revealed by the archangel to the Holy Virgin according to the gospel: "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the most High shall overshadow thee. For Holy is that which is born of thee, Son of God." To whom be glory and honour for ever and ever. F. C. CONYBEARE.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.